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ABSTRACT

This booklet highlights consultation on the community link to educational reform. Participants included 25 representatives from local education funds (LEFs) in the southeastern United States and 9 representatives of statewide and regional organizations. This booklet describes the role of LEFs, which are independent, nonprofit, community-based entities devoted to supporting public education in the community. The context of education in the southeastern United States is also described. As LEFs develop, they progress from communicating education needs to the public, to community building, to impacting policy, and to acting as advocates for public schools. Future LEF roles center around ongoing reform and advocacy. Barriers to LEFs include turf battles; lack of assistance in technical matters; a need for help in moving from high visibility, short-term activities to more strategic, change-oriented programs; and the maintenance of business-community involvement. In conclusion, LEFs provide special opportunities for creative approaches to philanthropy in the region, linking grassroots support of education with comprehensive efforts at school reform and systemic change. (LMI)

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LOCAL EDUCATION FUNDS:

THE COMMUNITY CONNECTION TO EDUCATION REFORM

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A Report on a Consultation Sponsored by the Alabama Power and BellSouth Foundations

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LOCAL EDUCATION FUNDS:

THE COMMUNITY CONNECTION TO EDUCATION REFORM

A Report on a Consultation Sponsored by The Alabama Power and BellSouth Foundations

Tuesday, November 17, 1992
Atlanta, Georgia

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BACKGROUND

On November 17, 1992, the Alabama Power Foundation and the BellSouth Foundation hosted twenty-five representatives from local education funds (LEFs) in the Southeast. Participants were invited to discuss the LEF role in building community support for improvement, reform, and systemic change in public education. An additional nine persons, representing statewide and regional organizations with experience in, or potential for, supporting the work of LEFs, were also invited to observe the meeting and to consider what role their organizations might play in the continuing development of local education funds in the region.

The consultation was designed to encourage sharing of information – by providing funders with a more thorough understanding of the needs which LEFs attempt to meet, the resources which they bring to bear, and the opportunities that their work provides for communities, urban and rural, in the South. The consultation also sought to enable LEFs to discuss how they might work, individually and collaboratively, to strengthen communities and to promote meaningful education improvement and systemic education reform.

PHILANTHROPIC INTEREST

Local education funds are drawing increased interest from philanthropy. Much of this interest has heretofore been local – the nature of LEF activities in communities makes them attractive to community foundations, local corporations and private foundations whose interests are geared to the needs of a specific community. Increasingly, however, the potential of local education funds to promote significant education improvement and large-scale systemic reform has attracted the attention of larger funders. Some of these are private foundations but others are company-sponsored foundations. It is particularly appropriate that company-sponsored foundations are increasingly interested in local education funds in the South; it was, after all, a partnership between business and government which resulted in education reform in the region.

The Alabama Power Foundation and the BellSouth Foundation are two company-sponsored foundations in the South which are concerned about public education and have expressed interest in aspects of the work of local education funds. The Alabama Power Foundation was created in 1989 by the Alabama Power Company, the largest employer in the state. The Foundation makes grants in the area of arts and culture, civic and community affairs, health and human services and education. As part of its commitment to improving education in Alabama, the Alabama Power Foundation, in 1991, started a new program, the Alabama Education Initiative, which will develop and support up to 69 local education funds in school districts with the greatest economic need in the state.

The BellSouth Foundation was created in 1986 by the BellSouth Corporation, one of the largest corporations in the Southeast. The Foundation is committed to a single purpose – the improvement of education in the region. It operates in nine states: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The Foundation supports strategic efforts to engender long-lasting education reform and devotes substantial attention to discovering the most effective means to bring about such reform. While its interests preclude, for the most part, operating support of individual local education funds, the Foundation is attracted to the possibilities presented by effective networks of local education funds to bring about systemic change in education in the region.

Company-sponsored foundations are increasingly interested in local education funds in the South.

Both the BellSouth Foundation and the Alabama Power Foundation are explicitly interested in collaboration with other philanthropic entities in promoting education improvement and reform. This commitment, along with increasing interest in the work and the potential of local education funds, led to the jointly-sponsored consultation.

The foundations chose twenty-five funds which were representative of the diversity of LEFs in the region in size, governance, activities, relationships with school systems, and commitment to education improvement and reform. The consultation looked at the nature and organization of LEFs, their activities, their role in the community, their projections for the future and the implications of their work for other organizations concerned about education improvement and reform.

WHAT ARE LEFS?

Local education funds are unique organizations. Broadly stated, a local education fund is an independent, non-profit, community-based entity which is devoted to supporting public education in the community. Local education funds differ substantially from other locally-based organizations which are concerned about education improvement. The independent status of LEFs distinguishes them from those local education foundations which exist to enhance fundraising for a school district. Their roots in the community and their accountability to a diverse group of local citizens who serve as directors distinguishes LEFs also from business-education partnerships.

A local education fund is an independent, non-profit, community-based entity which is devoted to supporting public education in the community.

Local education funds are as varied as the communities in which they are located. They differ in their genesis, their relationship to schools and other institutions, their governance and their funding. They also differ in the activities in which they engage. Many local education funds concentrate on support to teachers through targeted "mini-grants." Others undertake public awareness programs to promote community knowledge about the needs and accomplishments of public schools, while some work with schools to experiment with curriculum change. Some funds have established dropout and truancy prevention programs, while others promote increased parent involvement in designing programs to improve science, mathematics and reading skills of students. A few local education funds, usually larger and more established, have begun to approach questions of systemic education change.

Profile of LEF Participants

The differences among funds is reflected in a profile of participants who attended the Alabama Power/BellSouth Foundation meeting. The newest is less than a year old and the most established over 13 years old; the average age of attending funds is between 5 and 6 years.

The majority of attending LEFs were started by local citizens' groups which came together for the express purpose of establishing a local education fund. In other cases, LEFs were begun by existing organizations within the community, such as Chambers of Commerce, Junior Leagues, or PTAs. Very few were initiated by schools or school systems.

Regardless of origin, all of the participating LEFs are governed by independent boards of directors or trustees which are composed of parents, business people, volunteers, school-system employees, and in most cases, a few teachers. The size of the boards ranges between nine and fifty members and about half of the funds reported that they provide their boards with some sort of special training.

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Most of the LEFs which participated in the consultation are staffed, many by volunteers. Others rely on paid part-time or full-time employees. A majority of the LEFs at the consultation have no office of their own; some rely on donations of space from other non-profit organizations or, in a few cases, the school systems.

The communities which the LEFs represent vary greatly in size. The number of pupils in school districts range from 2,000 to 200,000 with the number of schools served from 5 to 381.

This difference in size is reflected also in the annual budgets of participating LEFs. Budgets vary from a few thousand dollars to $500,000 per year. Support primarily comes from local businesses and individual contributions followed by grants from foundations. Occasionally, local education funds also receive support from school systems.

Fundraising is regarded as important and most funds devote considerable effort to preparing written proposals, soliciting individuals and businesses and sponsoring special events. Fundraising techniques vary depending upon the size of the staff of the LEF, with the larger and often more experienced ones utilizing a more comprehensive mix of techniques.

LEF Supported Programs

Participants reported that 80-100% of their budgets are spent on program. Programmatic activities include grantmaking, special events to support the schools, newsletters and publications, training for faculty and staff, scholarship awards, conferences and workshops, awareness programs and research. Most of the attendees plan to expand or change the direction of their activities in order to include issues which are directed more toward education reform and system change. Many LEFs expressed a desire to transcend "feel good" activities and focus more on the need to make a broader impact on what schools do in communities.

In undertaking their program and related administrative functions, the majority of participating LEFs receive advice from outside sources. Advice comes from consultants, universities, other local education funds, and from perusal of brochures and annual reports of other educational organizations and foundations. Funds also request advice of professionals in their communities on financial and investment matters.

A central part of the work of LEFs, attendees reported, involves cultivating and maintaining productive relationships with school system leaders. Some LEFs reported turf issues – suspicion on the part of school administrators and others that LEFs might challenge school system authority. For the most part, however, LEFs maintain strongly cooperative relationships with the schools and their leaders. In several instances, school systems provide in-kind support to LEFs by making available office space for staff. These and similar arrangements caused substantial discussion at the consultation – while close association with the school district can facilitate aspects of an LEF's work, there is in this closeness, a potential for conflict of interest or a reluctance on the part of an LEF to take positions on issues which might run counter to that of the system. Furthermore, if an LEF appears to be too close to a school system, it may sacrifice public confidence in its independence.

A central part of the work of LEFs, attendees reported, involves cultivating and maintaining productive relationships with school system leaders.

A great strength of LEFs are the resources which they generate to support schools. LEF ability to broker such support is an important incentive for school system cooperation with local education funds. Participating LEFs suggested that early acknowledgement by the school system of the LEF role in attracting such support greatly reduces start-up problems for new funds. There was no doubt among participants that LEFs must devote significant energy to ensuring that the school system and individual schools perceive their relationships with the LEF to be in their interest.

Participating LEFs identified a wide range of areas where they need advice and assistance, especially:

- Developing new program ideas.
- Developing fundraising ideas and locating new funding sources.

- Networking with professionals in the field.
- Operating without paid staff.
- Reaching out to all parts of the community.
- Developing or accessing information networks.
- Developing reliable financial systems.
- Long-range planning.

LEFs noted that, if funding were available, they would devote themselves even more to pursuing methods to improve their operations and educating themselves and their communities about pressing educational issues. Many indicated a desire to join a national organization of LEFs and all wished to avail themselves of expertise from outside consultants. Most wished also to attend workshops and to share information with other LEFs.

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Representatives from three of the groups in attendance gave brief descriptions of their organizations which further illustrated the diversity found among the LEFs.

- **The Pee Dee Education Foundation** serves twenty school districts (200,000 students) within nine counties in the Pee Dee River region in South Carolina. The area is mostly rural and economically depressed. The Foundation focuses on collaboration between business and educators to ensure their ongoing cooperation in meeting educational needs in the area. The Foundation encourages the involvement of people from private enterprise in the work of the schools. It has recently promulgated a strategic plan which, when implemented, will move the Foundation beyond mini-grants to more comprehensive approaches to school improvement.

- **Forward in the Fifth** was formed specifically to address a declining high school graduation rate and today serves thirty-nine counties

in and around the Fifth Congressional District in eastern Kentucky. Forward in the Fifth operates through a network of local affiliates – county-wide entities which represent business, parents and educators. Each local affiliate must have the expressed support of the school superintendent. Forward in the Fifth helps affiliates develop and carry out regional programs and provides grants to match local contributions.

- **The Chattanooga Public Education Foundation** was founded four years ago to serve two school systems, one in the city and one in the surrounding county. Its mission from inception has been to cause systemic reform. It is an endowed fund (currently at $7,000,000) and its board consists entirely of business and community leaders in Chattanooga/Hamilton County. The Foundation is working extensively in the area of professional development for administrators and teachers.

Some local education funds move beyond program operation to an appreciation of the need for systemic change in education and seek to develop support for this change.

Discussions arising out of the presentations made by these LEFs lent credence to the identification by the Public Education Fund Network, a national organization of local education funds, of discrete "stages" in the evolution of LEFs. Early on, local education funds are devoted to constituency building – bringing together community representatives to develop interest in and support for public schools. Soon thereafter, local education funds establish a supportive relationship with individual schools and the school system and work to increase the number of individuals and organizations in the community actively supporting public education. Some local education funds later move beyond program operation to an understanding of the need for longterm systemic change in education and seek to develop support for this change. More advanced LEFs work with school systems to plan and conceive programs to bring about systemwide changes and then implement major restructuring activity.

The classification of local education funds by "stages" provides a useful framework for the variety of activities which LEFs undertake. It also highlights the organic nature of these organizations – they respond to and promote change in themselves, in schools and in surrounding communities.

THE SOUTHERN CONTEXT

Participating funds were aware of their affiliation with a national movement while, at the same time, sensitive to their special situation in the South. The funds have unique roles which result from the history of the region and the early development of the local education movement. LEFs are dedicated to increasing community support of public education. They developed during a period of significant public disaffection with the quality of public education. In the South, disaffection stemmed from a number of causes.

The aftermath of public school desegregation saw a migration on the part of many white and middle class students into private academies which, in all too many cases, were no more than institutions to preserve segregated schooling. Those who remained in public schools were often minorities and often poor. A public education system based on a turn-of-the-century agrarian model and accustomed to educating children of intact two-parent middle class families was increasingly unable to meet the needs of this population. The result was not only a decline in measurable performance in the schools but also public disinvestment from and disparagement of public education.

Local education funds in the South were confronted early on with the challenge of supporting public education in the face of powerful social trends.

Local education funds in the South were confronted early on with the challenge of supporting public education in the face of powerful social trends. They soon had the opportunity to promote education reform. The South's commitment to education reform was evident before that of any other region and was manifested in the development of new policies prior to the publication of "*A Nation at Risk*", which spoke to the national need for education reform. Early efforts at statewide reform took place in Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Arkansas. The success of these efforts was ultimately dependent upon the enthusiastic cooperation of an informed citizenry. Local education funds provided a means to mobilize a critical mass of citizens in support of educational innovation.

Early reform activity in the South was spurred from the "top down". State legislatures, responding to prodding from governors and chief state

school officers, set new, more rigorous standards for educational outcomes. In many instances, these sweeping reforms bypassed local involvement in education improvement.

Now, however, the nature of education reform has changed. It is centered less around the implementation of new state policies than in innovation at individual school buildings. State mandates remain in place, but with them comes an understanding that effective school reform requires flexibility and experimentation on the local level. In most Southern states, school districts and individual schools are now vested with increased authority to determine how they will meet state standards.

LEFs AND EDUCATION REFORM

In order to be effective, new efforts at school reform and school restructuring demand the informed participation of concerned citizens. Educators and policymakers are convinced that communities must commit themselves to a more significant role in education improvement. Local education funds have an important role to play not only in ensuring citizen support for schools but, perhaps more importantly, in promoting citizen involvement in education change. Because of their roots in and knowledge of their communities, local education funds have significant potential to be central players in new efforts at education reform.

Yet before participant funds can become effective instruments of systemic change, they must develop more comprehensive agendas and the means to carry them out. All the participant funds in the Alabama Power/BellSouth consultation began with "hands on" activities such as mini-grants to teachers. Those with a longer history reported that they began to broaden their perspectives as they gained support and experience. Participants observed that there is a definite need to start with "soft" mini-grants and gradually develop the capacity to play "hard ball" and develop broad-based community support to effect systemic change.

Newer and smaller LEFs work on activities which "define" the role of the LEF within its own community. These groups tend to see themselves as vehicles for communicating needs to the public, as a means by which parents and concerned individuals can make a difference in

schools and communities. As a result of these efforts, funds become recognized as major sources of support for improving education in communities. Much of their time is spent with organizational tasks to develop structure and to operate high visibility programs.

More established LEFs in the South reach beyond immediate short-term activities and more consciously assume responsibility for community building. These groups interact with educators and business to identify longterm educational needs in the community and build a consensus around means to meet these needs. As they begin to develop new programs, they often are caught between expectations for continuing the old programs and desire for a more strategic approach.

The most experienced, and often the largest, LEFs evidence willingness to participate in policy-oriented efforts. Forward in the Fifth, for example, is active in Kentucky's statewide education reform efforts and tailors some of its grassroots activities to support its state wide objectives.

Participating LEFs see themselves as advocates for public schools and for change in education. Advocacy varies from "cheerleading" for public education to taking positions on important educational issues. The handful of funds in the region which have begun to function as policy advocates spoke about the risk that such activity brings with it – advocacy may threaten relationships with the school system and may alienate some of the original supporters of the LEF, but it may also result in meaningful reform.

FUTURE ROLES FOR LEFS

LEFs engaged in a spirited discussion about the future. In answer to the question "Where would you like to be in 5 years?", one participant from an older LEF replied, "we'd like to be gone because we're no longer necessary." His hope was that school board members and school administrators might eventually do their jobs without the need for outside support or intervention.

It was, however, agreed that the need for education improvement, reform and advocacy is ongoing. LEFs have the opportunity, if not the obligation, to continue to work to ensure that reforms are enacted. They can also continue to serve as a link between school and community after needed reforms are in place.

Other, less established, LEFs expressed a desire to be more closely part of their communities. As one participant expressed it, "to be as well-known as the Chamber of Commerce."

The newest LEFs' five year goals were somewhat more direct: to have scholarships funded, to be able to fund all mini-grant applications, to be able to empower every teacher to be an innovative classroom leader.

Barriers Encountered by LEFs

What barriers do LEFs feel may keep them from reaching their goals?

Representatives of the smaller and newer LEFs outlined several obstacles that must be overcome. Working with existing school structures can be difficult, especially if there is a lack of system support and/or turf battles. Limited funds and the inability to access funders is another difficulty. Many LEFs struggle to survive in systems that are largely poor or minority. In many of these districts, citizens with the most influence live outside the community or are involved only with private schools.

These LEFs also expressed a need for assistance in moving from high-visibility, short-term activities to more strategic change-oriented programs.

Newer LEFs admitted to needing a great deal of assistance, especially in technical matters. They were especially concerned about overcoming isolation and having opportunities to communicate regularly with other LEFs about mutual interests and concerns.

Maintaining momentum was discussed as a potential problem for growing LEFs. Groups may suffer if there is a lack of continued support. As board members retire, LEFs may also have trouble with continued board development. These LEFs also expressed a need for assistance in moving from high-visibility, short-term activities to more strategic change-oriented programs.

Among the older and larger LEFs, a primary concern was with building and maintaining the business community's involvement. Several of these LEFs now address the relationships among education, economic development and a better quality of life. This makes their approach more inclusive and allows them to reach out to citizens not directly involved with or concerned about the public school system.

WORKING WITH LEFS

Representatives of state and regional organizations attending the consultation identified several solid reasons for working with LEFs. LEFs have a positive impact in developing educational opportunity and involvement in education improvement. LEFs stress the value of education reform at a community level, building grassroots support for the larger programs developed by state and regional organizations. High-quality LEFs can take risks, and the ideas and programs they fund are encouraged to experiment and even allowed to fail.

Most state groups at the meeting felt that they are in a strong position to support LEFs. By assuming a convener role, state-wide groups can work in conjunction with LEFs to deliver their own models for change. State groups can help leverage funds for LEFs. They can also help them expand the substance of their programs.

On a national level, groups like the Public Education Fund Network (PEFNet) can help members overcome isolation by providing otherwise unavailable sources of information and support. This network can also help keep a national focus on questions that are central to LEF operations.

LESSONS

The consultation sponsored by the Alabama Power Foundation and the BellSouth Foundation was one of the first such gatherings in the region. Participants provided funders and one another with new insights about local education funds, the context in which these funds operate and their potential for growth.

The variety and the richness of means which local education funds use to bring about school improvement and systemic change stand out. Local education funds in the South seem to be evolving through the stages of LEF development identified by the Public Education Fund Network. Almost all started with mini-grants but many have extended their programs to engage schools, school systems, school boards and communities in change-oriented activities.

All of the funds have strong roots in their localities. This gives them a targeted focus, a local support base and the ability to make strategic decisions which can positively effect their communities. It is this local perspective and the ability to transform their immediate surroundings that give to local education funds a special and unique role in education reform efforts.

Many education reform efforts in the South are tied to or grow out of the need for community-based economic development. Local education funds often have board members who are affiliated with economic actors within the community; they appreciate the important link between effective schools and thriving communities. The ability of LEFs to speak in practical terms of the economic benefits of community support of education gives them credibility within their locales.

It is this local perspective and the ability to transform their immediate surroundings that give to local education funds a special and unique role in education reform efforts.

Local education funds also have the potential to become major independent philanthropic actors in the community. All local education funds, regardless of their size or circumstances, redistribute community resources. They raise funds which, through grants and related activities, are then disbursed to support aspects of public education in the community. In those localities where there exist community foundations or private foundations concerned about education, local education funds provide an important supplement to these institutions. On the other hand, in communities where such institutions do not exist, local education funds can serve as fledgling single-purpose community foundations.

Local education funds demonstrate in many ways their roots in the community and the strength they derive from these roots. Yet, participants were careful to stress, the close relationships between local education funds and other community institutions do not reduce the need for local education funds to maintain their independence from school systems and other organizations with education agendas. There is, participants noted, a strong potential for local education funds to serve not only as catalysts but also as advocates for ongoing change. In order to be effective advocates, funds must continue to draw legitimacy by providing support to exemplary public education endeavors while they engage school boards, administrators, and policymakers in substantive discussions about education issues and how those issues affect communities.

To continue to be effective, local education funds must combat the threat of isolation – isolation of communities which have in too many cases undergone wrenching change engendered by segregation, isolation from information about education innovations, and isolation from each other. The need for effective networking among local education funds in the region is strong and the potential for growth which can arise out of such networking is equally strong.

CONCLUSION

Local education funds provide both challenges and opportunities for philanthropy. The Alabama Power Foundation and the BellSouth Foundation intend to respond to these opportunities. The Alabama Power Foundation will continue to work to develop LEFs in Alabama. It will provide them with information, technical assistance, and access to organizations – other LEFs, educational organizations and funders. The foundation's annual review of LEFs in the state will guide its future involvement with the Alabama Education Initiative.

The BellSouth Foundation intends to investigate further the possibility of supporting concerted statewide or regional efforts of LEFs at education reform. BellSouth will promote activities – networking, services, and technical support – which will result in a stronger presence for local education funds in the region as a whole. The Foundation will consider a special invitational program to pursue this interest.

Both foundations will create and maintain new and stronger channels of communication with local education funds and work to link LEFs in the region with other funders. Local education funds provide special opportunities for creative approaches to philanthropy in the region. They link grassroots support of education with comprehensive efforts at school reform and systemic change. They have the presence to build communities and, in the aggregate, the power to transform education policy. They thus invite philanthropic interest and support.

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